

by Thomas Fleming

In Praise of the Clan

A new Dark Age is already upon us, and perhaps we might learn a few lessons from the last one. It was a time when the arts of civilization were dimly recalled in fairy tales, when Krum the Bulgar khan gilded a Roman emperor's skull and used it as a drinking goblet, when the careful and equitable laws of the Romans were displaced by Germanic tribal codes that hearkened back to times before "Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre." As in Gaul (or Britain) during the fifth and even sixth centuries, a few Romanized Celts cultivated good Latin and marital fidelity, while the sturdy Franks took as many women as they could support and preferred the rough tales of their ancestors to the supple lines of Vergil and Statius. Tacitus praised the Germans for what we now might call "family values," but the strength of their social organization lay not in the nuclear family but in the sense of blood and kin that connected them into clans, tribes, and nations.

Our American barbarians are not, of course, anything like those sturdy tribal Germans who would, in a few centuries, discipline their own vigorous customs into something like a civilization. Our postcivilized men and women lack even the healthy instincts of the wild beast: They are more like the feral dogs who know only enough of human beings not to fear them.

The reality is there for anyone to see, if he does not know only what he reads in the paper or sees on the evening news. It is not the gloomy spectacle of public fornicators and reptilian businessmen that should interest us, however. Man, made in the image of God, is a creative creature, even in dissolution. In times of social and moral chaos, when law and discipline and form have disappeared, he will revert to the more primitive customs dictated by the flow of hormones and the force of genetic pressure—the amoral pursuit of individual survival and sexual gratification—and, lacking the mental discipline required to sustain a complex commonwealth, he will have to rediscover some simpler form of organization that will give him the immediate sense of identity provided by barbarian tribes.

In the previous Dark Age, the univer-

sal principles of Roman law crumbled, and the old law of blood and status was reintroduced by the invaders. Among the Germans, a man's status was, if not everything, a quality that trumped most considerations of fairness and justice. Kill my brother, whether by malice, self-defense, or accident, and I am obliged to kill you or secure proper compensation, and the laws governing homicide specified that the amount of *wergeld* to be paid was proportionate to the social status of the murder victim. Considerations of kinship, tribal membership, and "feudal" relationship took precedence over fact and fair play. A stranger without powerful friends was nothing; a tribal leader from a powerful clan was everything.

Some minor considerations of status lingered in Anglo-American law down to the end of the 19th century. A man might be held liable for torts committed by his dependents (both children and wife), and aliens, naturalized or not, were discriminated against in many ways. Preference was given to native-born Americans in employment, Sicilian criminals were repatriated to Italy, and no nonnative could become the president of the United States. Even at the end of the 20th century, aliens did not have all the same rights as citizens, though Justice Thurgood Marshall argued that they should.

Marshall was an interesting case: A typical liberal in viewing all men and women as rights-bearing individuals, regardless of the accidents of birth and citizenship, he was, in the more active phase of his career, a single-minded advocate of the rights of one group—namely, his own—over all others. Marshall would, no doubt, have said that all he wanted was equality for Americans of African descent, but equality turned out to mean special privilege after special privilege, from the racially motivated redistricting of congressional districts to minority set-asides to affirmative action. Most of these privileges, it must be said, violated both the federal and state constitutions—a clear indication, to those who had eyes, that our political order was no longer based on the traditions of Anglo-American jurisprudence.

When the American majority acquiesced in a revolution that manifestly damaged their own children, they were making it clear that they, like much of the Roman imperial aristocracy, no longer cared about the people who represented the future of their families and their nation. In that sense, the old America was really dead, not merely doomed, by the time of the Kennedy-Johnson years.

In the short run, European-Americans have been the losers, and government—not blacks or women—has been the big winner. This will be true, even if the concept of reparations is accepted as the logical conclusion—which it is—of the civil-rights movement. There is, of course, no valid "legal" claim, in the sense of Anglo-American or Roman law. General Sherman, who actually wanted to own slaves after the Civil War, had no legal or constitutional right to promise ex-slaves either land or mules, and his illegal acts were overturned (as he knew they would be) after the war. He was no more competent to make a guarantee of reparations than I am.

The historical and legal claims against corporations that benefited from slavery are no better, but it is a wonderful sign of the times that guiltless people can be held responsible for the presumed crimes of their ancestors and predecessors. "The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:29). As a moral and ethical principle, this saying was rejected by the prophets and by Christ. As a fact of life, it cannot be eliminated. Men and women who swap mates or take drugs have children who will pay the price for the parents' sins. And there was a time, even in America, when the children of robber barons and gangsters could not pay their way into decent society.

In modern America, this sounds absurd, precisely because we are incapable of any moral reasoning that does not reduce all ethical and political questions to individuals and the state. Neither Marxists nor Misesians can consider the moral significance of families and kin-groups. We have "liberated" married women from their husbands and children from their

parents, and we wonder why the institution of the family is crumbling. We even liberate retired people from their children and grandchildren by sending them Social Security checks that enable them to move to dreary trailer parks where the sun shines bright, even in January, deep in the heart of Texas, Arizona, or Florida.

The only conservative response to the collapse of "family values" has been to propose tax remedies to strengthen the nuclear family. The proposals, which are good in themselves, do not address the problem. The nuclear family is an artificial and hypothetical construct based on the very concept of the individual that has destroyed family life. A family, according to the conservative individualists, consists of the more or less permanent bond between man and wife, parents and children. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles are welcome additions to a family gathering, but they are not included in the essential definition. If the family of three-and-one-half individuals gets into trouble, either because the children run wild or because some government busybody disapproves of spanking or homeschooling, the only recourse is to hire a lawyer or call upon a pro-family organization to take up the case.

The nuclear family is a highly fragile social construction. Parents who wish to bring up Christian children in an anti-Christian world soon realize that the odds are against them. The anti-Christian American regime can mobilize all the vast forces of schooling (public and private), the media, and popular culture—to say nothing of the law and the police—in the service of its ideology. Once upon a time, parents, faced with a child running bad, might have sent him out to Granddaddy's farm to work off his energy, or locked him in his room at night, or, failing all else, stopped sparing the rod. Any of these strategies, if applied today, could land the parents in jail.

A husband and wife, even if they are heroic parents who have kicked in their television set and moved to the country, and even if they spend their available time teaching their children Latin at home and dragging them to church twice a week, begin to realize that, if they rely strictly on their own resources, they are going to lose a certain number of their kids, if only temporarily, to the mass culture. So they form homeschooling groups or even start a school in conjunction with their church. These are excellent things to do, but I have watched with

my own eyes as well brought-up teenage girls, deeply involved in wholesome and instructive activities, have begun painting their faces and hiking up their skirts to show off their legs. Before long, they are meeting 30-year-old men on the internet and, still worse, asserting their rights. A couple of dozen grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins might be able to surround such a child with the affection, ridicule, and discipline that would preserve her from harm until she reaches the age of reason—which, in America these days, is some time after 30.

From the ancient perspective, a husband and wife and their children represented only a link in the chain that connected ancestors with descendants. The Greeks and Romans had no word for "the family." Instead, they had two sets of words, one (*oikos, familia*) that emphasized the household (which could include slaves, hired servants, and various dependent relations), and the other (*genos, genus*) that emphasized broader kinship or common ancestry.

Until recently, governments have left nuclear families alone, sensing that they present no threat to the power of the state. However, the builders of powerful states have always feared the strength of the extended family and the clan. Whether in Britain, the Balkans, or the South, clans have been a law unto themselves. This may not always be a good thing, as evidenced by the frequent blood feuds that erupted in Scotland, Montenegro, and Texas: In times of need, however, it is the clan that has the power and the will to stand up for its members when they are oppressed by government.

The Soviet leadership learned this lesson quickly. The first generation of Bolsheviks had learned from Marx that the family was an instrument of class oppression. Although their contempt for the family matched that of Hillary Clinton and other modern leftists, they quickly decided that, while the nuclear family was a useful tool for rearing the state's children, the extended kin networks in Russia and Ukraine were a threat to the total power of the state. Henceforth, Soviet law, while breaking up the extended family, gave protection to what shallow and historically ignorant sociologists like to call the "bourgeois family."

Today, then, faced with the state's stepped-up efforts (though largely unconscious) to destroy the last remnants of Christian civilization, American families are being given very bad advice from

evangelical pop psychologists who want them to recreate the Ozzie and Harriet model of the 1950's family. Contrasting the self-fictionalized Ozzie and Harriet with the equally banal but all-too-real Ozzy Osbourne and his wife, conservatives hold up the Nelsons as the ideal suburban family: a dad who did not have to work, a mother who baked cookies all day, two inoffensive children—one of whom was successfully marketed as a rock star. The Nelsons were, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, "decent, godless people." No one believed anything, no one did anything, no one went to church.

Instead of mooning over the Nelsons and the Cleavers, American reactionaries could be looking at reruns of *The Real McCoys*, a series that depicted the tribulations of a displaced Appalachian family trying to run a farm in California. In coping with California and their child, Luke and Kate McCoy were not alone: They had Luke's sister Hassie and Grandpa McCoy to support them, and, after a while, they even incorporated the Mexican farmhand, Pepino, into the family.

Going beyond Walter Brennan and Richard Crenna, American families might take even more valuable lessons from the *real* McCoys of West Virginia, a brave and hardworking people who knew how to support their families and protect them from their enemies. (I mean no disrespect to the Hatfields, even if they were Unionists.) Like all clans, the McCoys prized their freedom and knew that it depended on the efforts and loyalty of the clan, not on government, not on movements, not on counselors.

There is not much left of the McCoys or of any other clan in the developed world, but, as the darkness gathers once again, Christian families had better understand that their freedom and independence will not come from a pro-family tax policy or a legal foundation or a militia group. Those who wish to be free will have to move back to their hometown (or find a new one), drag Grandpa out of the rest home or trailer park where he thinks he is happy, hunt up the cousins they have not seen in ten years, and begin to think of their friends and employees as potential candidates for adoption into the clan they are building. If nothing else, they will form a network of friends with whom they can exchange recipes and share grief. At best, they will found the village that it takes, so we are repeatedly told, to rear a child.

<c>